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OPINION

The Census Bureau's Racial Straitjacket

In the 2010 survey, 53% of Hispanics said they were white. The next census may not let them.

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By AMITAI ETZIONI

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Earlier this month at a meeting of the Population Association of America, researchers presented preliminary findings that more than two million Hispanics changed their racial classification to "white" in the 2010 census from "some other race" in 2000. Overall, according to official data, 53% of Hispanics classified themselves as white in 2010.

Yet for 2020 the Census Bureau is considering racializing the constellation of Hispanic ethnicities. The current population survey asks if a person is of "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin" and states that "Hispanic origins are not races." Then another question presents individuals with a range of racial categories, including white, black, or "some other race" to choose from. For the 2020 survey, the Census Bureau proposes a single question about a person's race or origin. Among the racial categories to choose from is "Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin."

This would be damaging. Racial categories are considered immutable, biologically determined and have often enough served as the basis of mutual hate and distrust. In contrast, ethnic categories are considered a normal part of Americana—most of us have some kind of ethnic "hyphen." We are Polish-American, German-American, and so on and on. Americans consider that kind of ethnic diversity culturally enriching.

News media already are beginning to refer to Hispanics in explicit racial terms. An April 8, 2014, San Francisco Bay Guardian article is headlined "Report details how brown and black communities are decimated, step by step"—although the report, about gentrification, actually deals with "the Latino and African American communities." More often, Hispanics are treated as a race implicitly through their inclusion in a racial lineup such as "Blacks, Hispanics More Optimistic than Whites" (Associated Press, Aug. 1, 2013), or "Will Today's Hispanics Be Tomorrow's Whites?" (Slate, April 15, 2014).



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The Census has for many years taken a very enlightened position on racial categories in its population surveys. Since 1970, individuals have been free to declare their own racial and ethnic identity (until 1950, census surveyors marked a person's race as they saw fit, and in 1960 some people were allowed to choose). In recent years Americans have even been able to state that they belong to several races or refuse to be

boxed in by marking "other." This approach is particularly commendable since historically, prejudice was often based on other people imputing racial affiliation to Americans. The Deep South used to believe that if an individual had even one drop of



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black blood he was to be treated as black, regardless of his skin color or the way he viewed himself.

Race data from the Census also are used to distribute hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid, draw political districts and enforce a variety of civil rights laws. And so the more Hispanics define themselves as white—the less money and affirmative action advantages might flow their way.

Since 2010 the Census Bureau has used statistical procedures to modify the data in its survey, assigning a specific race to each person who ticked the "some other race" box. The bureau then issues a "Modified Race Data" file to be used for the purposes of disbursement of funds and affirmative action, although keeping the original statistics of the choices people themselves made. In effect, it keeps two sets of books.

Other than the distribution of public funds and the drawing of congressional districts, does any of this matter? I think it does. The changes proposed for the 2020 census affirm and further encourage the media to racialize Hispanics, and many colleges use Census categories in their admissions policies. If the Census Bureau is allowed to proceed, it will increase divisiveness when what we need is more community building.

Hispanics—who are set to make up close to 18% (60 million people) of the U.S. population by 2020—are a diverse group of people with varying ethnic ancestries. Trying to shoehorn them into a single racial category would be a step backward for a country that, to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., strives to judge people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

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